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MIREILLE SCHNYDER

MIRRORS OF ORAL COMMUNICATION.
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE GERMAN PARTS
OF THE *CODEX CUMANICUS*

Estratto da

Il codice cumanico e il suo mondo

A cura di Felicitas Schmieder e Peter Schreiner
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MIREILLE SCHNYDER

MIRRORS OF ORAL COMMUNICATION
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE GERMAN PARTS
OF THE *CODEx CUMANICUS*

Speaking about «German parts» of the *Codex Cumanicus* (CC) suggests some coherent texts, at least some meaningful phrases in the German language. But all we have are some lists of verbs and phrases on eleven pages in the second part of the CC and a few glosses added to the Coman-Latin-Persian vocabulary in the first part of the Codex¹. It is material which can be looked at by linguists trying to define the German dialect, by paleographers trying to differentiate the hands involved² or by orientalists looking for some help with the translation of the Cuman language³.

We do not know exactly when these German parts were written down, but common opinion situates it around 1340⁴. Probably they also

¹ Cuman-German list of words: leaf 56r, 57r, 57v, 58r, 58v, 59r / 78r, 80v, 82v. The glosses in the first part will be neglected in this paper. Ligeti comes to the total number of German glosses in the CC of 499. L. Ligeti, *Prolegomena to the Codex Cumanicus*, in G. Kuun (Ed.), *Codex Cumanicus* (Budapest Oriental Reprints Series B 1), Budapest, 1981, 1-54; here: 49. In literature about the CC we find sometimes the term «German part» for the whole second part of the CC. I am using the term only for the parts (pages) with German words.

² In her study about the *Codex Cumanicus* in historical and social contexts, Drüll identifies the dialectal colour in the German words as «Ostmitteldeutsch» from the region north of Leipzig, and she differentiates between 16 writers by their hands. D. Drüll, *Der Codex Cumanicus. Entstehung und Bedeutung* (Geschichte und Gesellschaft 23), Stuttgart, 1980, 92; 94; 105. Ligeti doubts this with reason and speaks about Germans from different regions. Ligeti (cf. n. 1), 50.

³ J. Riecke, *Der deutsche Wortschatz des Codex Cumanicus*, in *Sprachwissenschaft* 19 (1994) 62-114.

⁴ Cf. J. Riecke (cf. n. 3), 63 s. «On the basis of the paper and the watermarks Györfy suggested that this part of the Codex was written between 1340 and 1356. An earlier conception maintained that this part was not a copy, but rather a collection of original

were written by Franciscans in the South of Russia⁵ but whether they were done by the same hands as the Coman texts of the second part (religious texts and riddles) – as Dagmar Drüll suggested – is very questionable⁶.

The German parts are not really that which interested the scientific society most. So for a long time these vocabularies have been thought to be part of the translations of the religious texts⁷, or they have been seen as an aid to understanding the Comanic texts.

The question about a meaning of the words in their specific context or the purpose of these lists has not yet been asked⁸. When Dagmar Drüll edited a complete list of all German glosses in the Codex, she neglected the immediate context⁹. But important for the following reflections is her convincing conclusion that the German parts must be «original» parts. Her argument is mainly the chaotic arrangement, which would have been more organised in a copy¹⁰. That means: the German word-lists have not been copied from earlier manuscripts and they then reflect in their missing systematisation and chaotic layout an original note-taking situation.

texts, glosses and insertions, which were added continuously in the course of a relative long time. However, it is not difficult to prove that a part of these texts are copies of previous texts, or were written down after dictation. Ligeti (cf. n. 1), 7.

⁵ Ligeti (cf. n. 1), 8, with more bibliographical hints. Annemarie von Gabain shares with Bang the opinion, that we are dealing with Franciscans working at the lower part of the Volga. Cf. Drüll (cf. n. 2), 133-135.

⁶ Cf. Drüll (cf. n. 2), 31: «Das lateinisch-persisch-kumanische Glossar (Blatt 1-55v), die kumanisch-deutschen Wörterlisten (Blatt 56r, 57r, 57v, 58r, 58v, 59r), der Anfang eines italienischen Gedichtes (Bl 56v und 59v) und die nicht entzifferbaren italienischen Texte (Blatt 58v und 59v) sind erst Mitte des 14. Jh.s niedergeschrieben worden». For a critical point of view see Ligeti (cf. n. 1), 51.

⁷ O. Pritsak reads the German glosses as an exercise for the translation of the religious texts. Cf. Riecke (cf. n. 3), 65, note 12.

⁸ Only I. Baldauf asked about a specific sense in these lists and took a very similar view on it as I will do here. I. Baldauf, *Missionshilfe oder Kuriositätenammlung?* Das komanisch-deutsche Glossar im *Codex Cumanicus* (14. Jh.), in K. Kreiser (Ed.), *Germano-Turcica*. Zur Geschichte des Türkisch-Lernens in den deutschsprachigen Ländern, Ausstellungskatalog (Schriften der Universitätsbibliothek Bamberg 4), Bamberg, 1987, 15-18.

⁹ Drüll (cf. n. 2). Without context and totally neglecting the Coman words, the word-lists she offers are of no great use.

¹⁰ Drüll (cf. n. 2), 32. For this argument see: W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*. The Technologizing of the Word, London and New York, 1982, 49 s.

Jörg Riecke edited the German parts of the Codex again in 1994. His reading of the German words mainly follows Drüll with some minor corrections, which go back to the review of Drüll's book by V. Drimba (1983)¹¹. But in contrast to Drüll, Riecke doesn't cut off the Coman – and Latin – context in his edition. And he gives a very helpful glossary of the German words, connecting them with the lemmata in the «Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch» by Lexer. Uncertainties he solves with the translation of the attributed Coman words. By this way we get quite a secure translation, which would not be possible without the understanding of the Coman parts. This provides a solid basis for further studies, which now have to ask about the purpose of these lists and the way they have been created.

Reading the German words on folio 56r to 59v and 80v to 82v as they are listed by Drüll or by Riecke, one just gets lost in a disparate and on first sight very contingent combination of verbs, nouns, adjectives, syntagmata and prepositions. Verbs are normally given in the first person singular, sometimes in the two tenses present and past, but often only in past – and from time to time as the infinitive. When connected with nouns they appear in the third person singular. Nouns normally are given with article and are sometimes connected with adjectives. Adjectives often appear as a pair of opposites (e.g.: quick/slow). A quick look at these lists gives no hint to any religious vocabulary and they would not seem to be very useful for merchants¹².

Even though Riecke gave the context, trying to render the words as closely as possible, the setting of the pages is also disturbed in his edition. The isolated words deny any possibility of finding any order in them. So we have to rearrange the edited lists in the original way. For that we have to go back to the facsimile or to the edition of Kuun.

Taking these lists to be «original», i.e. the first notation without any systematising or ordering copy-work, we can reconstruct an original situation in which these pages might have been created. And we can

¹¹ V. Drimba, *Review of D. Drüll*, in *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique* 28 (1983) 458.

¹² These vocabularies are far away from merchants handbooks as they are to be found in this time, the more individual ones, the Zibaldoni, and the «official ones», the Manuali. On this subject: M. A. Denzel, «Wissensmanagement» und «Wissensnetzwerke» der Kaufleute. Aspekte kaufmännischer Kommunikation im späten Mittelalter, in *Das Mittelalter*. Perspektiven mediävistischer Forschung 6 (2001/1) 73-90; here 78 s.

start to ask about the extratextual context and a narrative behind these paratactic little items¹³.

What I'm attempting here is less a definite explication of the German parts, but a sketch of two possible approaches to these lists of words. That is a) to define the semantic fields in which the German words are situated and b) to have a closer look at the layout and the composition of the pages searching for a frame, a situation, a non written context, in which they could have been arranged in this specific way¹⁴.

In the German words we can differentiate the following semantic fields: trade (especially with lambskin) / agriculture (especially burning of fields and fallow land; threshing) / fishing (especially roe production) / hunting / different skills (handicrafts, especially involving textiles; art of sketching and engraving) / shipping (with the scenery and dangers of the sea and river) / malady, birth and death / the human body (mainly when involved in activities and only the visible parts) / animals and their voices / social interactions (fighting, being angry, caressing, disputes...) / burial / outdoor-scenery (island, desert, river).

The words belong to the daily life of a population for whom agriculture and trading with sheep are the basis of subsistence. But there are no numbers, no definitions of social ranks¹⁵, there is no hint to writing, storytelling, speaking or translating. The words are connected with actions and the human body, with the place where the Cumans live, but interestingly we find nearly no things to eat or expressions of time or space. It means that there is no abstraction and no classification, no terms for rationality, no terms for social structures, and no metacommunication reflecting the process of understanding, translating, writing and speaking. But merely the absence of all that is a characteristic of a genuine oral culture¹⁶. It is the present, visible, audible, single case and concrete situation which is spoken of. So nouns, verbs and adjectives,

¹³ Ligeti points out to the fact, that the German words are written on pages left blank. «It cannot be a coincidence that the five blank pages of the second fascicule and the similar five pages of the third fascicule are filled up with German glosses. [...] Nevertheless, it is certain that the German glosses were the last items to be added to the Codex, since they take up only the pages left blank.» Ligeti (cf. n. 1), 51. This fact underlines the possibility that the blank pages have been used for note-taking.

¹⁴ Baldauf (cf. n. 8) already asked in a similar way about traces of oral situations in these lists.

¹⁵ With the exception of 'lord' «greve» (taraga) and 'stepfather' «der styf vat».

¹⁶ Cf. W. J. Ong (cf. n. 10), 42 s.; 45 s.; 49.

half phrases and phraseologisms are wildly entangled. It is not a system of any kind which structures the language and the expression but event and action¹⁷. In the concrete setting of the words we might then find traces of events and actions, the concrete situations in which these words have been written down by an interested German-speaking friar. Let us then try five exemplary looks at the concrete setting of the words, searching for the hidden threads between them.

1. Page 56r, the first one with German words, starts with «I'm frightened» (ich irschracke), «I have been frightened», «I frighten you» (ich irschrecke dich), «I frightened him» (ich erschreckte yn), which gives the impression of a kind of systematic view. The same we find, when after a line in Coman, not only the tenses of one verb are given, but obviously a semantic field is opened: «entangled» (virworren), «disentangled» (entworren), «disentangle» (entwerren), «I entangle» (ich virwerre), «reel» (winde), «twist» (czwirn), always with the past tense and infinitive form. Then follows a list of different qualities of lambskin: «a lambskin» (eyn lampuel), «a fine lambskin» (eyn smoce), «a shorn sheepskin» (eyn geschorn schafuel), «a tanned leather» (eyn gegerwyt ladir). After some Coman words with Latin translation: «litigo» (I dispute, quarrel), «facio vobis adiutoriu[m]» (I give you support) it goes on with German translation: «I'm careful with» (ich schone), also in past tense and imperative. Then a quite strange phrase: «I'm picking my teeth» (ich stochere di czene) and another not really fitting phrase: «I'm stirring the fire» (Ich schøre das vu'ir). Here again the past tense of the verb: «I stirred» (ich schorte). That is followed by: «I'm blinking» (ich plince) also in the past tense, «a sharp knife» (eyn scharf messir) and «I make the deal» (ich koufslage). Then the phraseologism: «The longer it gets, the greater» (is wirt y lengir y grossir) before the verb: «I pant / I snort» (ich plostere). And at the end of the page: «a trace» (eyn spor) and «empty» (hol).

The traces of systematisation we see in the different tenses of verbs reflect the aim of the writing German, who tries to get a grammatical understanding of the language. This language is given to him in single words, as part of an action or a story, but never part of a grammatical explanation which would take the word out of its specific use. This spe-

¹⁷ It is the «direct semantic ratification» which defines the meaning of the words. W. J. Ong (cf. n. 10), 47, citing Goody and Watt (1968), 29.

cific use becomes clear by the semantic field, which opens on the second part of the page: trading with sheepskin and wool. Here we can catch a glimpse of a scenery of merchandising and bargaining: «I make the deal», «I blink», «I snort». Even the Latin «litigo» and «facio vobis adiutorium» make sense in this context. «I'm picking my teeth», «I'm stirring the fire» and the «sharp knife» fit in a setting of trading by disputing and sitting together around a fire.

In the words of page 56r we find then a genuine oral situation of trading. That the verbs are mostly given in the first person singular underlines the oral characteristic of this language, which is a part of the speaker and not an abstract sign. Explanations of feelings or actions can best be made by using the own body.

2. The word-arrangement on folio 57r seems at the beginning quite systematic: animals with their voices (dog and horse in German translation, cock and wolf in Latin) and different noises of men: «groan» (d'mensche krøHcit) and «snore» (snarkit / ich snarke / ich snarkte). But then, beside «snore» we find also the words: «I'm lost» (ich bin verlorne) and the adjectives «sharp» (scharf) and «blunt» (stump). At the end of the first paragraph we read in Latin: «do not hide» (noli celare). Then: «a spring» (eyn gesprink), «a well» (eyn burn), «I fell on my back», «I was lying on my back» (ich vil cu rucke, ich lege uf dem rucke), «the dog barks and I realise it» (der hunt bal ich wart is gewar), «we have been lying together» (w logen bi eyn andir), «a sausage» (eyn wurst), «I strike and miss» (ich sluk unde miste), «[I] cursed» (verfluchte), «I'm rowing or I am twisting a wick» (ich rudere adir ich dree tocht)¹⁸, «a grain of sand» (eyn santkorn), «odour» (smak besides the latin «odor»), «I snort» (ich plostere, ich plostirte) and at the end of the page: «a handicraft» (eyn hantwerk) beside the Latin «ars» (art).

It's difficult to find sense in these words. And it's not my goal to do so. But the idea that we find here the track of an adventure with a dog, a sausage, someone falling on his back, a lying-together is tempting, but whether it was a real situation or a story which was told cannot be determined¹⁹.

¹⁸ Probably it reflects the literally and the metaphorical meaning of the expression.

¹⁹ Baldauf (cf. n. 8) speaks about the scenery on a halting-place (p.17). I prefer the idea of a story being told.

Reading these words into a narrative (absurd as it may be) opens the view on the situation in which these lists have been created. They are clearly related to concrete situations, actions, narratives, visible things. And they reflect the problem of the writing «scholar» who tries to put the oral communications in grammatical categories, to break the oral present narrative or action into a structured written language.

3. When we find on the next page a list of words which seems to be the result of a systematic inquiry about physical states and actions of men, it shows again the primary attempt of the writer to go on systematically. But then the abstract and systematic view gets lost behind a conglomerate of words which mean concrete things, actions and gestures from such different semantic fields that the writing is dominated by the oral situation. It's no longer the interested stranger asking, but the native-speaker telling a story²⁰.

The end of the page gives the splintered words of a hunting-scene and speaks about a herd of animals of different colors²¹. One gets the impression of participating in (the telling of) a hunting-event.

4. Page 80 va opens with the semantic fields of: a) sanity, medicine and birth: «fever» (das kalder), «disease» (di zucht), «naked» (blos), «sorrow, grief» (r^uw), «scales on the head» (schupen of im hoypte), «to pinch» (ich kniype), «caress» (streychelt), «he helped me to drink» (he half mer trinken) and «he helped me to bring water» (he half m wasser

²⁰ The opposit adjectives «quick» / «slow» (trege / ris) are followed by verbs of bodily actions: «I stretch myself» (ich renzse mich), «I belched» (ich roypczte), «I cough» (ich huste), etc. But this quite fitting conglomerate of verbs is disturbed by the following nouns: «the quill» (di vadir keil), «a long rope» (eyn lanc seyl), «a tower» (eyn turm), «the naked» (der nakke), «a lord» (eyn greve) and a little bit later: «a rock» (eyn velz). And the verbs following are actions and gestures like «I scream» (kreysch), «I knead» (ich knate), «I uncover, I expose» (ich enplos) and feelings like: «here it's itching me» (hi ivct is mich). The words in the second line give sometimes synonyma or get into the same semantic field. So for example stands the verb «I bowed» (ich boygde mich) in neighbourhood of «I'm obedient» (ich gehorche), two verbs for «knotting» (ich knote, ich knuppe) stand besides «I knead».

²¹ «herd» (eyn hert), «two-coloured» (gehalbirot), «striped» (gestrift), «noise» (eyn galame), a verb of competition (ich vette), a verb of semi-communication (ich murmure), a verb of obedience (ich gehorche), a verb of movement (ich iyle), besides words of time like «before yesterday» (egestern) or «before» (edus). And two verbs «I'm pressing» (ich druck and «I'm reporting» (ich melde).

brennen), «I got tired» (ich bin myde wrden), «twins» (czuennelinc); b) death: «testament» (zelgiret), «tomb» (en gihyft grap), «house of death» (des toden hws), «the image of the dead» (des dodin bilde); c) the production of roe: «I'm going back» (ich weych sin), «they come in masses» (zi komen mit gidrangi), «to praise oneself» (birumet sich), «the wall» (di muwer), «the catapult» (dy blyde), «the ditch» (der grabe), «roe» (dy roge); d) handicraft: «smithing» (ich smede), «making wagons» (ich mache karren), «to beat wool» (ich slo wolle), «weaving» (ich wirke), handling horses and working with silk.

It's tempting to knit the different fields together, but I resist. What I'm interested in on this page are the precise words around the graves. They testify to the astonished look of a stranger on the burial habits of the Comans with their gravehills and figural gravestones²².

5. The last example and the last page with German words in the *Codex Cumanicus* opens a view on a threshing-scene. From «worker» (en erbeyter) to «day-labourer» (ein mitelink) to «the place of threshing» (parkun), «chaff» (sprvy), «corn» (der kern), «a stick» (en czeyn) and «beating» (sluk) we find all we need to imagine the details of such a scene. In contrast to most of the other pages we have here a nearly compact scene, which gives the impression of a writer standing beside such a working place asking the words of the different actions and instruments in a nearly systematic way.

Conclusion. The German parts in the CC have nothing to do with the religious texts nor are they of any help to merchants. But it seems that they are traces of concrete situations in which the writer has been present and tried to fix the scene by naming it and writing the words down. The oral language and the visible actions and objects thus find their way into the text as single words. From time to time there has been an attempt to systematise by grammar, by a system of time and space, but mostly the single words just reflect the oral situation they have been

²² Cf. H. Göckenjan, *Kumanen*, in *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 5 (1991) 1568 s. For the Cuman graves see also: P. Jackson (Ed., Transl.), *The Mission of William Rubruck*. His journey to the court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253-1255, transl., introduction, notes and appendices by P. Jackson with D. Morgan, London, 1990, 95; 108. And: Guillaume de Rubrouck, *Voyage dans l'empire Mongol*, traduction et commentaire de C. et R. Kappler, Paris, 1985, 104; 113.

part of. In some of these situations the writer has been involved, asking words, but without being able to bring any order into the language (trading-scene). In other situations it seems to be a mixture of curious participation in an action (birth of twins) and the curious view of a stranger on unknown rituals and symbols like the figurative tombstones. Furthermore, we find situations where the writer seems to be out of the scene, looking at it and asking the words for it in a nearly ordered way. There we do not have the oral situation of a discussion (like in the first case) and we do not have the dangerous situation of malady or birth, but the nearly undisturbed look at a scene of agricultural activity (threshing). The German parts of the CC show us the edges of the life of the German Franciscans and let us have a look through their eyes at the daily life of the Comans²³.

²³ To conclude out of the erotic vocabulary that it wouldn't be the notebook of a Franciscan, as Baldauf does, doesn't seem to me convincing. Baldauf (cf. n. 8), 17 s.